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THE NATURE-POETRY OF THE PSALMS

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IV. THE MOUNTAINS, SEA, TREES, AND FLOWERS

How did the mountains appeal to the Hebrew poet? To the Greek and to the poet of the Middle Ages, to Homer and to Dante, they were objects of dreariness and gloom. Tall forests clothed their rough flanks and the wild beast and the outlaw descended from their caves and labyrinths to ravage the fertile plains below. By the Greeks the mountains were regarded with feelings of awe, but mostly with utter aversion. Mounts Olympus and Parnassus were sacred to the gods and to the muses, but their snow-capped summits and inaccessible heights were forbidding. Palestine, however, was a mountainous country. Geographers describe the Holy Land as having all known varieties of mountains. But the majority of these mountains are in reality rolling hills with a fertile soil and are often cultivated to their very summits. On the whole the mountain or hill was a delightful object in the landscape. In earlier times when the religion of the Hebrews was undeveloped and when anthropomorphic conceptions of God were prevalent, the mountains, especially Mount Sinai, were regarded with feelings of awe and fear as being the abode of the Deity, as we have already pointed out in connection with the theophanies, where use was made by the psalmists of such expressions as, "The mountains melted like wax before Jehovah,"¹ and "He touched the mountains, they smoke."² In later times, however, the erection of the Temple on Mount Zion, and no doubt the influence of the shrines erected by the foreigners to their gods on the high places, led the people of Israel to look up to the mountains with trust and prayer, so that a psalmist can sing,

In his hands are the deeps of the earth,
To him the heights of the mountains belong.

The mountain gradually lost its forbidding aspect and came to be associated with ideas of strength, of fertility, and of joyfulness.

¹ See Ps. 97:5.

² Pss. 104:32; 144:5.

The idea of strength is beautifully brought out in Psalm 30:

Through thy grace, O Jehovah, thou hast set me on a firm mountain,
I shall never be shaken.

A psalmist prays,

Be thou to me a rock of refuge,
A mountain-fortress to help me.

Another sings,

Thou art he who sets fast the mountains by his strength,
All girded about with might.

The mountains round about Jerusalem were a constant inspiration to Hebrew poets, who beheld in them strong defenders of the Holy City:

The mountains encircle Jerusalem,
And Jehovah encircles his people.³

References to the cattle on the everlasting mountains, the rich pasturage to be found there, and "a Lebanon of fruit trees," which we noted above, show that the psalmists associated fertility with the mountains. Canaan is called a mountainous range:

He brought them to his holy territory,
To the mountainous range which his right hand had won.

The figure of the oil which flowed down Aaron's beard is followed by a felicitous reference to the fertile slopes of the mountains. The oil "is like the dew of Hermon, which flows down on the mountains of Zion." The mountains of Bashan are personified and are regarded as being unfriendly toward and jealous of the lower but favored Mount Zion:

A mountain-range of God is the range of Bashan,
A range full of peaks is the range of Bashan.
Why look ye unfriendly, ye peaks of the mountains,
At the mount whereon God loves to dwell?

Another sinister reference to mountains occurs in Psalm 76, where the Seleucid, foreign rulers and foes of Israel, are compared to "mountains of prey." Mountains are also spoken of as being homes for the wild goats, the marmots, and the birds.

Some very fine imagery in the Psalms would not have been possible had the Hebrew poets looked on the mountains with fear or aversion. The mountains can be joyful and join in the people's praises to their

³ References to Mount Zion, Pss. 2:6; 3:4; 14:7; 15:1; 20:2; 24:3; 43:3; 48:1; 74:2; 87:1; 99:9; 132:13.

God; now "Tabor and Hermon praise thy name," again the poet cries, "Let the mountains shout together for joy!" It is on the mountains that the army of the Messiah assembles,

On holy mountains out of the lap of the dawn,
The dew of thy young soldiery offers itself to thee.

In the mature thought of a later psalmist, seas, rivers, and mountains rejoiced at the deliverance of Israel from bondage,

The sea saw it and fled,
The Jordan ran backward,
The mountains skipped like rams,
The hills like young sheep.

There are no grander passages in the Psalter than those which allude to the sea. The sea appealed to the Hebrew poet as being a work of God: "The sea is his, and he made it." The prevailing mood which the sea superinduces in the Psalmist is one of exultation in that it displays the glory of God. It is a fierce monster which God has quelled and to which he has set limits that it dare not pass. As the Psalmist beholds the great breakers come tumbling in upon the beach he exclaims, "Thou art Lord over the arrogant sea; when its surges roar thou hushes them." If man has lordship over the sea it is because God has given him power and skill. "I lay his hand on the sea," says the ancient oracle, "His right hand on the rivers." But it is to God that the sea does obeisance:

The waters saw thee, O God—
Saw thee and trembled,
And the deep floods reared themselves aloft.

The sea is bidden to join in the general thanksgiving to God—"Let the sea roar and the fulness thereof!" Perhaps the most triumphant expression of God's lordship over the sea is contained in Luther's favorite psalm,

God is our refuge and stronghold,
A help well proved in distress.
Therefore we fear not, though the earth bubble,
And though mountains shake in the heart of the sea.
Let its billows roar and foam,
Let mountains quake at its uproar;
Jehovah Sabaoth is with us,
The God of Jacob is our fortress.

The Hebrew psalmists then did not dislike the sea as did the Greeks and the people of mediaeval times. They rejoiced in the fact that the sea yielded obedience to God and the mightier the exhibitions of its strength the greater appeared the majesty of the Lord. There are certain expressions in the Psalter which at first sight would incline us to believe that the Hebrew poets hated the sea. The use of such a figure as,

Flood calls unto flood in the sound of thy heavy shower,
All thy surges and billows go over me,

would perhaps suggest terror of the sea, but the reference here is either to a heavy rain storm, or to the Jordan in spate, which at full flood dashes over its rocks with a noise as of the breakers of the sea. The reference to the rush of calamitous waters in Psalm 32:6, "the floods of great waters," seems also to be more applicable to the river Jordan or to a spring freshet than to the sea. The vivid image of the saint being engulfed in "deep waters" (Psalm 69:1-3) is clearly a reference to the dangers which threatened the wayfarer in the numerous swamps of Palestine; "the mire of the flood" could scarcely be applicable to the sea. In Psalm 88:7 the "billows" are the floods of the subterranean Sheol.

The only deliberate attempts at describing the sea in a storm occur in Psalms 93 and 107. The former is a very short poem and is in marked contrast to such a sea-piece as the well-known poem of Byron beginning, "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll." Before the Hebrew poet begins his description, he praises his god whose throne stands firm from of old. And how vague and how colorless is his description of the storm itself!

The streams lifted up, O Jehovah,
The streams lifted up their roar,
The streams lifted up their tumult,
But mightier than the thundering billows,
Mightier than the breakers of the sea is Jehovah on high!

Here we find no fanciful epithets such as Byron loves to use, but only a few age-old, tremendous words such as a child of today would use in describing the sea. A rude climax is noticeable in these verses. First the floods are agitated; they have lifted up their heads; now

they begin to roar; higher and higher they lift their heads to the heavens in a tumult of harsh voices and far-reaching spray. Then the last lines are heard above the noise of the breakers dashing on the shore as the poet full of exhilaration and delight in the majestic spectacle cries with full voice, "But mightier than the thundering billows is Jehovah on high!"

The writer of Psalm 107 has sailed the deep in ships and from his experience in a storm at sea and a happy deliverance from peril he gives this simple but powerful description,

They who sail the sea in ships,
Trafficking over great waters,
Saw the works of Jehovah,
And his wonders on the deep.
He spoke, and caused the stormy wind to rise,
Which tossed the billows on high;
They mounted to the sky, they went down to the depths.
Their courage melted away in their distress,
They reeled and staggered like men who are drunk,
And were at their wits' end—
When they cried to Jehovah in their trouble,
He brought them out of their distresses;
He hushed the storm to a gentle whisper,
And the billows kept silence;
They were glad, because they were quiet,
And he led them to the desired haven.

The Hebrew habit of mind, in its love for the salient features of a scene, is revealed once more in this description. There is no color but there is vastness and movement. The picture of the rise of the storm and of its fury is very graphic. "They mounted to the sky, they went down to the depths." The balance and swing of this verse makes it one of the best strokes of genius in the entire body of Hebrew poetry. No marine artist or any modern artificer in words has given to the world a more heart-stirring picture of distress at sea than this ancient poet in his unpretentious but searching phrases. The fondness of the Hebrew poet for quick dramatic turns is seen here in the sudden transition which delivers us in a moment from suspense to relief. And after the hoarse roar of the tempest and the dire extremity of the voyagers how sweet the close of this anthem of the sea,

He hushed the storm to a gentle whisper,
 And the billows kept silence;
 They were glad, because they were quiet,
 And he led them to the desired haven.

Addison never tired of this beautiful poem. He preferred this unambitious description of a ship in a storm to any sea-piece he had ever read, for the poet has not amused himself with little fancies upon the occasion, but has gathered together "those circumstances which are the most apt to terrify the imagination, and which really happened in the raging of a tempest." The largeness and the freshness of the poem, and of the treatment of nature in general by the psalmist poets, lends this perennial charm to their work which holds our hearts when the color and minutiae of modern poems pall and offend.

In the Psalter there are few allusions to trees or flowers. Trees are described only in the most general terms. The only instance in which their color is noted is in the comparison of the wicked to "a luxuriant green cedar" (Ps. 37:35), and where the Psalmist compares himself to "a green olive tree in God's house" (Ps. 52:8). There is only one mention of the palm-tree in the entire Psalter (Ps. 92:12), "The righteous buds forth as a palm-tree, he grows like a cedar of Lebanon." These famous cedars of Lebanon are mentioned in many psalms, and in the hallel chorus of Psalm 148 they receive special honor, being mentioned specifically along with the fruit trees. The cypress is referred to in Psalm 104 as being the stork's house (Ps. 104:17); the fig tree likewise is only mentioned once (Ps. 105:33). The vine is referred to five times. Besides the reference noted above the olive is only mentioned once, but in a simile which shows how much the tree was appreciated despite its scant recognition at the hands of the poets of the Psalter,

Like young olive trees are thy children,
 About thy board in a circle.⁴

The willow is referred to only once (Ps. 137:2). The trees of the forest are commanded to sing for joy (Ps. 96:12), and "Ye fruit trees and all ye cedars" are invited to praise the Lord (Ps. 148:9). The fading leaves of the trees, which have figured so prominently in nature-poetry since those ancient days, are not mentioned at

⁴ Ps. 128:3.

all by any psalmist. And singularly enough in the whole range of this splendid collection of Hebrew lyrics there is no definite mention of a single flower, although Palestine furnished a carpet of brilliant flowers for the feet of her poets every spring. Nothing beyond the wide allusion to "the flower of the field" betrays the fact that the Hebrew poet ever gave a second glance to the blossom and the bloom of his beautiful land.

We may well conclude this survey of the nature-poetry of the Psalter with an extract from one of the joyous lyrics which a wise editor deemed would provide a fitting close for such an optimistic treasury of song. In Psalm 147 we have spring and summer and winter, the bounty of Nature, the joy of earth; Nature is the servant of a good God, and utters ringing hallels through the revolving years:

He sends forth his orders to the earth,
His word runs with speed.
He gives snow like flocks of wool,
He scatters hoar-frost like ashes,
He throws down his ice-like crumbs.
Who can stand before his cold?
He sends forth his orders, and makes it all melt;
He causes his wind to blow, then the waters flow.
He has made known his word to Jacob,
His laws and injunctions to Israel.
Not thus has he dealt with any other people,
No other knows his commandments.